

BOOK REVIEWS

RUSSELL DINAPOLI. *The Elusive Prominence of Maxwell Anderson's Works in the American Theater*. Valencia: U. de Valencia, 2002.

The Universitat de València's «Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans» appears to be a new outlet for Spanish Americanists, its very name paying homage to one of our most distinguished representatives. A recent title in the collection is Russell DiNapoli's *The Elusive Prominence of Maxwell Anderson's Works in the American Theater*. Informative, readable and superbly documented, it constitutes the first important study of Maxwell Anderson ever published in Spain.

I confess I was one of those –alluded by DiNapoli– whose acquaintance with Anderson's work was limited, having found him more often mentioned in passing references than discussed in depth. Maxwell Anderson is certainly not very popular with modern audiences and quite neglected by most critics. Nonetheless, the fact that he is always included among the masters of American drama and acknowledged as a substantial dramatist had always excited my curiosity. DiNapoli's work proves an excellent introduction to this interesting albeit controversial playwright and his initial admission that he «found his [Anderson's] plays acceptable, but not great. Undoubtedly Anderson was a craftsman at writing plays. But greatness entails far more than just skill» (14) was for me an inducement to reading as I took it as an outright challenge of a rather set view.

The book has four sections or chapters. In the first one, «Drama in the United States from the Beginnings to the Second World War», DiNapoli offers a panoramic sketch of the history of American drama, from its colonial beginnings to World War II. Obviously, the account of the last decades is more detailed, this being the period when Anderson's many works were produced. Though this history is pleasant to read, it will probably say little to the expert; moreover, as there is no point that DiNapoli tries to make and his sketch has no relevance for the later discussion of Anderson, it rather delays the handling of central points and could have been done without.

The second chapter, «Maxwell Anderson's Plays: A Critical Overview», traces a history of Anderson's drama and its critical reception. In section three, disconcertingly entitled «Traces of Anarchism», DiNapoli analyzes the way Anderson's shifting ideological position(s) caused anger, reluctance to take him seriously or, from the fifties on, sheer indifference towards his work. DiNapoli

examines the playwright's ideological stance and its problematic delineation, as well as the uniqueness of a writer who, by managing to alienate Rightists, Leftists, Communists and nearly everyone else, was sentenced to a long ostracism, not well over.

If the book had ended after chapter three, one would feel a certain roundness in it and the certainty that it had proved or shown what it set out to prove or show; the real significance or interest of whatever that is would remain open to discussion. However, DiNapoli's study goes on. There is a chapter four, and this is, in my opinion, the one that presents his most original contribution to Anderson's criticism. However, I believe that the material dealt with in this chapter deserves an independent book and not simply a sort of disconcerting afterword in a work which is really dedicated –as evidenced by the title– to an altogether different subject. No matter how feebly and unconvincingly DiNapoli tries to connect both at some point, their enforced symbiosis remains puzzling.

Certainly DiNapoli's major contribution to Andersonian criticism is not the discovery of the elusive prominence of his works in the American theater –discovered long ago– but that of Anderson's original conception of tragedy, which sees it resting on «the dyadic association of an abstract hero with two contrasting protagonists» (93). I still fail to understand why the book was not articulated around this discovery, which would moreover possibilite a critical reassessment of the Andersonian canon, as hinted by DiNapoli.¹

But as my duty is not only to sing the praises of DiNapoli's otherwise excellent work, I feel I should point out some of the shortcomings I perceived. For instance, at points the authorial voice gets lost. To a certain extent, this is understandable as chapters 1 to 3 are about Anderson's critical reception and he chooses to stand aside in order to let us hear the opinions of critics and reviewers. But for me this, more than a justification, is further proof that chapter 4 –where his voice is more loudly heard– should have been the center of the work and not its last chapter.

In this sense, I wonder whether it was really necessary to have direct access to so many critical voices –particularly when after some pages I started having the feeling that I was reading what I had just read or even had read several times before– or whether it would have been better to skip some of them and offer us a mere account of major trends in Andersonian criticism and assessment, alluding to direct sources in parenthetical citations or with footnotes if some further explanation were required. As we absolutely believe DiNapoli has not invented his conclusions but derived them from reliable sources, we probably prefer to give our time and attention to his conclusions rather than to his sources. Of course I'm not suggesting their elimination, as their presence is essential for eventual checking or a more in-depth approach but not necessarily with such prominence. Certainly I miss footnotes in the volume, not

1. Nonetheless, I feel there is a certain naivete in DiNapoli's belief that the discovery of a new critical category, valid for some of Anderson's works, will reawaken interest in the dramatist and result in a fresh and enhanced appreciation of his plays by producers, editors and theatrical audiences at large.

because of any special fondness but because they could have been used to accommodate all those tiresome details and facts that DiNapoli incorporates into the body of the text and which end up getting in the way of a smooth reading and preventing you from following the main argumentation.²

Curiously enough in a volume so stuffed with facts, I was surprised at not finding an index for quick reference, which would have been of great help in a book which is –chapter 4 excepted– perhaps most useful as reference. Also, some further editorial work in order to avoid typographical mistakes would have been needed. Especially in chapter three there are several quotations for which no reference is supplied. Apart from these minor errors, the work consistently maintains a high standard of scholarship, as evidenced by its excellent bibliographical section.

There are a couple of statements that need clarification. The contention that «[p]rior to World War I, realism in Europe had lost ground to the expressionism of dramatists like Toller, Strindberg, Wedekind, and Brecht» (32) has to be reformulated as Brecht's first plays were actually not produced until the early twenties. Also, the assertion that a run of a hundred performances of *Hamlet* was «the longest playing engagement ever of Shakespeare's brooding tragedy» (20) needs specification as it is hard to believe that the longest run for Shakespeare's play could be one of just 100 performances, even if that could have been outstanding in a particular context.

It would have also been more clarifying had the author given in parentheses the year when each play was first produced instead of the date of publication of the edition included in Works Cited. The austerity and sobriety of the edition –usual features in the output of university presses– probably accounts for the absence of illustrations, though at times it would have been helpful to visualize specific productions of Anderson's plays.

Unfortunately, DiNapoli's volume does not list other titles in the «Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans» collection. I would have been greatly interested to know, especially if all of them are of the quality of DiNapoli's. As I see it, his has the unintended effect of encouraging you to rush to other items in the series and is, all in all, a very serious and honest endeavour and a remarkable attempt at opening new avenues of academic inquiry.

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DAVID RÍO RAIGADAS. *Robert Laxalt: La voz de los vascos en la literatura norteamericana*. n. p.: Universidad del País Vasco, 2002.

Nowadays, it seems undeniable that one of the healthiest consequences of the «canon wars» of the 1980s has been the discovery of a significant number of authors

2. Exceptionally confusing are DiNapoli's constant references to the dozens of plays written by Anderson.

who had been neglected for a long time. As a result, the literary canon of the United States has turned not only multicultural, but also more diverse and appealing. Over the past few years, David Río Raigadas has become the vocal force in tracing the legacy of the Basque-American minority in U. S. literature and, fortunately, his many efforts have finally crystalized in a major critical work which opens innumerable paths to future research on this fascinating field.

Robert Laxalt –who died on March 23, 2001– has found a knowledgeable interpreter of the sixteen works he left behind, several of which were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. By the time of his death, Laxalt had long been hailed as 'the voice' of the Basque-American experience, exploring the fate of the thousands who migrated to the United States mostly for economic reasons and often settled in Nevada as shepherds. This book offers a comprehensive study of how the image of both Basques and Basque-Americans unfolds in many of Laxalt's works.

Since Laxalt still remains a largely unknown figure in the Basque Country and the rest of Spain, David Río starts by offering a detailed biographical study of the writer's life: he pays special attention to the social, economic, and ethnic factors that motivated his parents' migrating to the United States in the early twentieth century, where they met and married. Born in California in 1923, Robert Laxalt spent most of his life in Nevada, where his brother Paul eventually become first senator and then governor in 1966, thus reaffirming the successful adaptation of some Basque-Americans in the «land of opportunities».

As Río Raigadas aptly demonstrates, most of Laxalt's fictional and non-fictional texts verge on the autobiographical, dealing with the difficult process both he and his parents had to endure in order to survive in a social and ethnic environment that sometimes met the Basques with indifference and even hostility. His main work, *Sweet Promised Land*, published in 1957 to critical acclaim, has been considered by William Douglass as 'the classic' literary text of the Basque diaspora. On the one hand it scrutinizes the migratory experience of Laxalt's own father, and on the other the trip both of them took in 1953 to their homeland, which fascinated the artist so much that he would return a number of times in the following decades. *Sweet Promised Land* set from the beginning many of the distinctive features of the author's literary universe: emphasis on the Basque reality, a realistic and intimate approach to events, an episodic structure, and a concise diction with sudden poetical outbursts which perhaps is not sufficiently quoted here.

According to this critical study, in Laxalt's works the diasporic movement to the American continent reaches symbolic dimensions and becomes an initiation rite, a quasi-mythical journey with profound connotations which are discussed here in great detail. Clear evidence of it is the trilogy Laxalt published late in his career depicting the evolution of the Indart family, again with a manifest autobiographical subtext. *The Basque Hotel* (1989), *Child of the Holy Ghost* (1992), and *The Governor's Mansion* (1994) offer multiple insights on the benefits and the risks of assimilation for the Basque-American minority.

While *The Basque Hotel* (1989) is an obvious recreation of Laxalt's personal experience as an immigrant in the United States, *Child of the Holy Ghost* is both a literal and metaphorical search for the world his parents left behind in Europe, since

the protagonist embarks on a symbolic journey back to the Basque Country in order to trace their roots. David Río carefully points out that this is the first occasion in which a female character is the protagonist in what otherwise tends to be a markedly masculinist literary domain. The protagonist's mother, Maitia, is presented as a victim of the prejudices of the patriarchal Basque society, so that she finally decides to escape away across the Ocean; the prototypical image of the Statue of the Liberty that appears at the end of *Child of the Holy Ghost* functions as a symbol of freedom in an obvious patriotic discourse celebrating the United States. Finally, *The Governor's Mansion* is commonly considered a failed attempt on Laxalt's part to write a political novel by fictionalizing the successful career of his brother in Nevada during the 1960s. While the novel acknowledges the success of some second-generation Basques like Paul Laxalt in their land of adoption, it also alerts to the destructive nature inherent in assimilating too excessively «the American way of life», since this adoption can imply forgetting one's roots or even betraying them. In order to prove this hypothesis, David Río pays special attention to the disintegration of the strong family ties of Basque culture in the United States, and in his analysis he makes extensive use of Werner Sollors' well-known theoretical concepts of «consent» and «descent», as he often does throughout the entire book.

In several of his minor miscellaneous works, Laxalt included vignettes depicting scenes of traditional rural life in the Basque Country. Major idiosyncratic features of Basque ethnic identity are underscored: the influence of the Catholic Church, the attitudes towards the law, the dependence on orality, the strong family life, the harmonious relationship with nature, or the conception of time. However, given that Laxalt's perspective never ceased to be a foreign one, David Río does not hesitate to note several times that his impressions can be rather idealized and reductive at times.

Nevertheless, Laxalt managed to cover in a fertile way new ground that widens the scope of contemporary U. S. literature with a distinctive voice. In his repeated attempts to explore and understand the Basque identity in both continents and the hardships of starting a new life in a foreign distant land, he contributed to enlarging the U. S. literary canon and added to its multicultural richness. If Robert Laxalt has rightfully become the voice of the Basque experience in the United States, with this informative well-documented overview David Río Raigadas has confirmed his position as the voice of Robert Laxalt in literary studies.

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Carme Manuel, ed. *Teaching American Literature in Spanish Universities*. Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans. Valencia: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya, Universitat de Valencia, 2001. ISBN 84-370-5340-4. 133 p.

This volume is included in the recently initiated collection of works on North American Studies edited by the University of Valencia, a welcome addition to the

expanding production on American Studies in Spain which has given rise to such valuable and useful initiatives as the carefully edited bilingual editions of American texts produced by the Taller de Estudios Norteamericanos of the University of León, among others. In its theme, the book also links up with the increasing concern with teaching in higher education that has filtered from American and British academia, reflected, for instance, in the collections on this subject issued by the MLA (*Options for Teaching and Approaches to Teaching*), or in the clearly didactic intent which guides the editors of works such as the 4th edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, published with an accompanying volume of suggestions for teaching.

One of the most valuable features of *Teaching American Literature* is that it begins by linking, through its first two articles, University education to the level immediately preceding it, that is, secondary schooling, a connection which is too often forgotten with dire results for both levels. In this respect, Benito Camacho Martín, the author of one of them, makes a lucid, if somewhat opinionated, analysis of the decline of the teaching of literature in secondary schools, both in terms of the hours devoted to it and areas covered, and in terms of the much-denounced reduction of the students' level of knowledge and interpretative skills.

The remaining articles –some in English, some in Spanish– deal with different aspects of the teaching of American literature, with a marked emphasis on twentieth century materials and especially on African-American literature; in fact, the book will be particularly useful to teachers of the latter. This imbalance in content is a natural result of what the book never tries to hide, that is, its origins in a Seminar on teaching organized by the University of Valencia. However, the weaknesses of the book are also related to its origins, and some could have been avoided with a stricter process of selection and edition. Some articles which obviously may have worked well as oral presentations lack the elaboration both in content and form that would be expected in written work of this category, including any bibliographical reference. Others are all too obviously drawn straight from the teaching projects required for full professorship in Spanish Universities; a few have the more serious flaw of straying from the teaching issue altogether and simply presenting particular readings of individual works.

Even so, there are useful practical suggestions and ideological considerations to be drawn from most, and the book also includes some excellent material. I would highlight, among it, Isabel Soto's «Teaching African American Literature in Spain», with its intelligent defence of the need to be conscious of the ideological and personal elements which are inseparable from teaching, and which constitute «a certain attitude to life which in turn influences choices and actions» (36), a defence backed up with extensive research and references to direct teaching experience. María Frías's text, also centered on African American Literature, is extremely thorough, exhaustively well documented and yet manages to keep teaching-oriented throughout: apart from her theoretical-ideological introduction, she offers several appendices including a detailed syllabus, a specific bibliography, and suggestions for both practical and theoretical classes, as well as a sample exam. If this, too, is derived from a teaching project, it is from a highly elaborated one. Finally, Juan Ignacio Guijarro's «And I

only am escaped to tell thee'», on teaching *Moby Dick*, combines a deep knowledge of the subject with a vivid and often humorous analysis of his personal teaching experience, in which a strong sense of frustration at his awareness of the limitations of many students is balanced with a stubborn optimism.

His account of his evolution from an abstract to a more sociohistorical reading of Melville's work in his teaching of the novel acts as a valuable reminder of the constant interaction that should exist between teaching, learning and research. Many of the essays insist on this interaction, as well as on an extremely idealistic approach to the teaching process; Scott Derrick's article on Emerson in the classroom summarizes this approach which considers the aims of teaching to be «to stimulate the mind, to encourage creativity, to instill critical thought and to cultivate the courage to disagree» (76). In fact, the collection suggests that there are many active and concerned teachers in Spanish universities, to the point that some of the criticism levelled by certain writers at the supposed passivity and unconcern of other teachers seems rather too vicious. Notwithstanding, it is true that the essays as a whole show a greater awareness of the work of other Spanish authors in the same field than is usual: for instance, Carme Manuel's bibliographies on methodology include ample reference to Spanish works, especially in the more general section.

These bibliographies, together with a section on visual material also compiled by the editor, constitute the closing section of the volume. Their undeniable usefulness, to my mind, could have been improved by a greater balance between sections (some unjustly brief, some excessively detailed) or by a previous, more limited and less ambitious, definition of intentions.

For all its weaknesses, then, the volume is good evidence of the healthy state of American studies in Spain, and of the existence of a group of devoted and concerned teachers which should intrigue, encourage and excite new generations of students. Teachers will find in it useful suggestions, bibliographical reference, and ideological stimulus for their work.

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